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This is the published version of a paper published in *Affilia*.

Citation for the original published paper (version of record):

Arnell, L. (2017)

The (Dys)Functionality of Girls' and Young Women's Violence.

*Affilia*, 32(4): 543-556

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0886109917712585>

Access to the published version may require subscription.

N.B. When citing this work, cite the original published paper.

Permanent link to this version:

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# The (Dys)Functionality of Girls' and Young Women's Violence

Affilia: Journal of Women and Social Work

1-14

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DOI: 10.1177/0886109917712585

journals.sagepub.com/home/aff



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## Abstract

This article explores how professionals talk about girls' and young women's use of violence; more specifically, how violence is constructed and conceptualized and its effects on social work practice. The data analyzed consist of focus group sessions with 11 professionals within social and youth work. The findings revealed that violence is conceptualized through interpretative repertoires as social functionality, psychological functionality, or dysfunctionality, which affect the professionals' conceptualizations of violence and social work practice. Accordingly, a multifaceted understanding of violence is needed, otherwise girls' and young women's violent acts risk being diminished and made into an individual problem to be solved.

## Keywords

gender, girls' violence, interpretative repertoires, social work practice, Sweden

What is understood as violence is contextual; it depends on social, cultural, and historical contexts. In different contexts, different kinds of violent acts are legitimized or understood as untroubled or understandable, while others are constructed as problematic, troubled, or criminal. Violence can also be enacted at various levels in society at an individual, group, or state level. How we understand violence is affected by the situation but also by ideas about the person who uses violent acts or is exposed to violence. Girls' and young women's use of violent acts has been overlooked in Sweden because of the small number of girls and young women who use violence (F. Andersson, 2013; Sarnecki, 2003). This can be connected to ideas about violence being related to men, masculinity, and power (Nilsson & Lövkrona, 2015), which construct girls' and young women's violent acts as deviant and gender transgressive. This perception influences the work that is done with girls and young women who use violent acts.

F. Andersson (2013) argues that, when working with girls and young women with experiences of using violent acts, it is important to be sensitive to gendered norms and perceptions of violence (see also, Batchelor, Burman, & Brown, 2001; Luke, 2008). According to Berg (2007), however,

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prevention work on youth violence rarely includes a gender perspective, which in turn can be understood to affect social work practice and how professionals approach issues involving violent acts. Estrada, Granath, Shannon, and Törnqvist (2009) argue that, in preventive work on violence in schools, it is important to include a wide perspective. This involves, among other things, that the professional needs to have a joint understanding of and knowledge about violence and that various forms of violence need to be taken seriously, since less serious forms of violence can lead to more severe ones, but also that less serious forms of violence signal that adults have not been able to provide enough support in young people's lives (Estrada, Granath, Shannon, & Törnqvist, 2009). Berg, Sjögren, Hyllander, and Söderström (2013) also emphasize the importance of looking at the structural aspects underlying the causes of social problems rather than only looking at the causes at an individual level. If structural aspects are ignored, there is a risk of missing the bigger picture, in this case, girls' and young women's life situations within the Swedish context, and specifically its welfare system, as well as their local context, such as school and neighborhood environments (for an international discussion, see, e.g., Burman & Batchelor, 2009). To reach a better understanding of violence and to improve social work practice, Luke (2008) argues that it is important to consider the professionals' perspective and to involve social education, practice, and research.

Waldron (2011) and K. Andersson (2008) both emphasize that the position from which the person who talks about violence is speaking is of great importance in understanding violent acts. Therefore, the aim of this article is to examine how professionals talk about, make sense of, and construct girls' and young women's violent acts, which are referred to as externalized physical violence toward others. The research questions are: How do professionals talk about girls' and young women's violence? What appears to be of particular importance in making girls' and young women's violence understandable? and What implications does this have in relation to social work practice?

### *Introducing Understandings of Girls' and Young Women's Violence*

At the beginning of the 20th century, in the Anglo-American context, there were political concerns about gender equality because it was thought that it would lead to women becoming disobedient and violent and would cause social problems (Pollak, 1953; see also Chesney-Lind & Irwin, 2008). This can be understood in relation to what has come to be known as the liberation theory of crime and violence, which argues that feminism and women's liberation have influenced women's opportunities to enter society and the arena of violence and crime, with the risk that women may become more violent (Steffensmeier, 1980; see also Luke, 2008). Nevertheless, girls' and young women's violent acts were usually ignored since the police, journalists, policy makers, and moral entrepreneurs focused on boys and young men (Godfrey, 2004). Thus, historically, girls' and young women's violence has rarely been prominent within research on youth violence.

However, by the 1990s, media coverage, societal changes, and new understandings of violence meant that attention was directed toward girls' use of violent acts in new ways (Chesney-Lind & Irwin, 2008; Estrada, 2001). Popular media portrayed the violent girl as nasty and vicious, and girls' and young women's violent acts were constructed as a deviant expression of mental ill-health in relation to gendered norms (Ringrose, 2006; see also Brown, 2011; Pettersson, 2003). Accordingly, girls' and young women's use of violent acts has often been made into an individual problem. Since the 1990s, the violent girl or young woman has been constructed in a variety of ways and captured within ambivalent ideas about a troublesome girl.

The way in which violent acts have been conceptualized and understood as an individual problem has, however, been problematized (see, e.g., Arif, 2015; Chesney-Lind, 1989, 1997; Chesney-Lind, Morash, & Irwin, 2010; Chesney-Lind & Irwin, 2008; Males, 2010; Schlossman & Wallach, 1978; Smart, 1976). Researchers such as Brown (2010, 2012) and Miller and White (2004) argue that girls' violence is not an individual problem but rather involves actions that are related to a variety of social

and contextual inequalities and power structures. Girls' and young women's violence has also been discussed in relation to girls' and young women's living situation and issues regarding family, schools, and community. Henriksen (2013) emphasizes that experiences of violence and mistreatment within the family influence girls' everyday lives, and K. Andersson and Källström-Carter (2014) show that violence within families also hides the situation of girls (and boys). Researchers also show that girls and young women who use violence are often abused, exposed to violence, experience inequalities at school, and are marginalized by society (Brown, Chesney-Lind, & Stein, 2007; Luke, 2008; Schaffner, 2007).

Research has also emphasized the importance of a gender perspective on violence when trying to reach a better understanding of girls' and young women's violent acts. For example, Miller (2002) argues that the dualistic model of gender limits the ways in which girls' violence is problematized since assumptions about gender differences restrict how violence is understood. K. Andersson (2008) also argues that violence is always a gendered activity regardless of who uses violent acts and that the social context and who the violence is directed toward are important. In addition, Arif (2015) explores how gendered norms affect the opportunities and constraints for girls to talk about their own use of violence. She emphasizes that girls' and young women's violent acts are conceptualized as deviant behavior and as actions that are recognized as generally inaccessible to girls and young women since the social and political system reproduces a patriarchal structure within which violence is reserved exclusively for boys (Arif, 2015, see also Brown et al., 2007).

### *Girls' and Young Women's Violence Within a Swedish Context*

In Sweden, girls' and young women's externalized physical violence toward others is a relatively unexplored area. This is usually explained in terms of the small number of girls and young women who commit violent crimes (F. Andersson, 2013; Estrada, Pettersson, & Shannon, 2012; Ungdomsstyrelsen, 2013). In a nationwide Swedish self-report study from 2011, 3.4% of girls (and 8.7% of boys) in the ninth grade reported that they had committed violence-related actions, such as physically hurting or violently threatening another person (Ring, 2013). In relation to this, it can be noted that of all the young people sentenced to juvenile detention, the proportion of girls and young women decreased from 3.7% (19 girls) during the period 2005–2009 to 3.1% (10 girls) during 2010–2014 (Nordén, 2015). It is, however, important to note that most young people (90% in 2014) who are convicted of violent acts like abuse or threats are not placed in juvenile detention (Nordén, 2015).

In recent decades, understandings of violent youth have changed within the Swedish context. Estrada (2001) shows that societal changes and popular media have influenced ideas about young people who use violence. The once-prevalent idea that the vulnerable (male) youth who uses violent acts has experiences of growing up in difficult family circumstances and who is in need of the Swedish welfare state's assistance changed during the 1990s. Now, such an individual is instead constructed as a "super-predator" (regardless of gender) who uses violence as an expression of power (Estrada, 2001). What counts as violent acts can accordingly be understood as open to negotiation and as legitimized depending on the contextual situation, the person who uses these acts and who is constructed as the victim (see also K. Andersson, 2008). How violence is constructed and understood is consequently linked to various ideas about societal norms and to factors such as gender, age, ethnicity, and class.

In the Swedish context, normative femininity is constructed in relation to concepts like passivity, moderation, kindness, empathy, and self-control (Ambjörnsson, 2004). However, more recently, discourses of girl power and girlhood as crisis have had a major influence on understandings and constructions of girls and young women. Similar to other Western contexts, girls' and young women's violent acts are constructed in relation to the meaning of girlhood as crisis and are linked to ideas of vulnerability and ill-health (Pettersson, 2003). However, girls' and young women's

independence and emancipation and the discourse of girl power are also of great importance when conceptualizing girls' and young women's violent acts within the Swedish context. Here, there is an ideal that girls should be strong and independent, and as Formark and Bränström Öhman (2013, p. 4) highlight, "Nordic girlhood rests on discourses that stress individual emancipation and gender integration of girls and boys" (see also Honkasalo, 2013; Söderberg & Frih, 2010). It thus becomes important, as Luke (2008, p. 46) highlights, to question the connection between emancipation and ideas about an increased use of violence among girls, as the liberation theory points out, and whether girls' and young women's use of violence actually gives them access to power and privileges (see also Brown et al., 2007, p. 1250; Pollak, 1953).

## Method

### *Participants and Data Collection*

This article is based on analyzed data gathered from three focus group sessions involving a total of 11 professionals, 8 women, and 3 men, aged between 26 and 54 years at the time of the sessions. These professionals are from three different municipalities in Sweden, and they have different job descriptions with different aims and frameworks for how their work is structured. The goal was to include people from various professional groups, in relation to social work, who meet and work with girls experiencing violence issues from different perspectives and with different aims.

At the time of the focus groups, the professionals worked in areas such as social services, correctional treatment and with the youth outreach police, and within various forms of social work such as family and youth health, recreational activities, outreach work, and youth services. Their titles were head of youth services (1), social worker (4), youth worker (2), outreach worker (2), youth outreach police (1) and correctional officer, and lay supervisor for girls (1). As the purpose of the sessions was to hear their thoughts, opinions, and narratives in relation to their experiences of working with young people and, more specifically, of meeting girls and young women who have experience of violent acts, the focus was not on their work as such. It is rather the collective narrative about girls' and young women's use of violent acts, and the story created together in the context of the focus group settings, that lies at the center of this analysis. The interest thus focuses on the narratives, as a way to construct and make sense of our world, and the impact of these constructions. Hence, I am also part of this constructed story by being physically present in the context, setting the stage with various themes and responding to the participants' talk with my own thoughts and ideas. These ideas are based on experiences of working with girls and young women and issues regarding violence, as well as experiences from the larger project, of which these focus group sessions are part.

The larger project includes these focus group sessions as well as 19 interviews and creative narratives (e.g., diaries, audio logs, and song lyrics) provided by seven young women with experiences of acting out and violence. In order to locate professionals who could help by providing contacts with girls and young women interested in participating, presentations were held for professionals who meet and work with girls and young women with experiences of using violence. It was through these presentations that the professionals' narratives caught my interest when it became clear that girls' acting out or violence was rarely talked about at many of the workplaces I visited, not even with the girls or young women with whom the professionals were working.

The focus group sessions were conducted during December 2014 and January 2015, and the professionals were contacted after attending a presentation at their workplace or through contacts I received during these presentations. The interviews lasted between 78 and 93 min, excluding the introduction, ethical discussions for the framework of participation, and the summing up at the end of the meeting. The focus consisted of three main themes: (1) work experiences regarding girls'

violence, (2) ideas about girls and violence, and (3) the importance of social work in relation to girls' violence. The interview had an open structure and formed a collective narrative created together. All interviews were recorded and transcribed in their entirety into a Microsoft Word document.

### *Discourse Psychology Analysis and Analytical Tools*

The analytical framework was inspired by discourse psychology. This can be understood from different scientific perspectives and is mainly based on interwoven ideas from discourse analysis and a social psychology perspective. The interest lies in the narrative as a doing and a speech act. Accordingly, the aim of a discourse psychology analysis is to examine the ways in which meaning is created in narratives and the effects of these constructions (Potter & Wetherell, 1987/2014). Narratives are understood as constructed in relation to both discourse and context (Potter & Wetherell, 1987/2014). Billig (1987/1996), however, points out that discourses are not uniform but need to be understood as complex and changing. According to Wetherell and Potter (1992), discourses, like societies and cultures, should also be understood as having a history and as ever-present. Discourses have a "real" substance, that is, they affect our understanding of reality. It is therefore only in relation to discourses that we can construct meaning. This means that narrating never occurs in a vacuum but is conducted in relation to contextual beliefs and expectations. Wetherell and Potter (1992) also highlight the social aspect of discourse analysis and the importance of interactions with the researcher and/or between the participants.

In the current analysis, interpretative repertoires and (un)troubled subject positions are used as an analytical tool. Interpretative repertoires can be understood as smaller discourses, or as part of a larger discourse, that are available in a specific context (Wetherell & Potter, 1992). Wetherell (1998) argues that repertoires are not used coherently but as resources for storytelling. Interpretative repertoires can thus be useful in understanding the different narratives within a larger discourse (of, e.g., violence), where different constructions and ways to create meaning are possible.

The subject has a prominent role within discourse psychology, and people are understood as active participants in the processes of meaning-making (Wetherell & Potter, 1992). To position oneself or to be positioned (as, e.g., violent) is understood as part of these processes, which are formed in relation to the present and available discourses. A troubled subject position refers to a position that is considered to be contradictory, negative and in need of change, in contrast to an untroubled subject position, which follows discursively normative expectations and ideals (Staunæs, 2005; Taylor, 2005; Wetherell, 1998). However, (un)troubled subject positions are not static but inconsistent, changeable, and negotiable; they can never be understood outside of discursive possibilities and constraints, even though they can stand in contrast to other discourses (Wetherell & Potter, 1992). By using a discourse psychology analysis, the focus is directed toward the meanings that are and can be constructed, here in relation to how girls' and young women's violence is constructed as (un)troubled or socially (il)legitimate acts.

### *Analytical Procedure*

The transcript material was themed in order to identify patterns, themes, biases, and meanings, which I then analyzed based on a psychological discourse analysis. As a starting point for the analysis, I used Potter and Wetherell's (1987/2014, pp. 158–176) analytical steps. The first step is based on getting to know the material and then making a first analysis by thematizing the narratives. Based on these themes, I then worked with the help of mind-maps to create a picture of how I understood the themes to relate to each other, and the gaps and limitations that I found in the narratives. Potter and Wetherell (1987/2014, p. 167) highlight this process as a way of coding in relation to one's research questions and one's perspective. The themes were then refined and

adjusted in relation to examples that I had drawn from research on girls' and young women's use of violence, including individual and structural perspectives on violence, as well as the experiences of working with girls and young women and issues of violence.

In the next step, I returned to the material, but this time through a more profound reading of the narratives. Since many of these relate to more than one theme, I allowed them to overlap and I have not removed or fixed them within only one particular theme. I then chose to look for the repertoires that I found to be most prominent in each theme or across the themes. Then I focused on how these repertoires are used and how they allow for or limit certain narratives but also the way in which they enable (un)troubled subject positions. Finally, in seeking to make the themes specific and at the same time applicable to broad principles, I once again linked my analysis to the research literature, and the discourses that are to be found there, in an attempt to reach a higher level of abstraction (Bertilsson-Rosqvist, 2007, p. 47).

## Findings

The focus group participants talked about and tried to make sense of a number of themes: various kinds of violence, how social workers should act, possible ways to understand the situation of girls and young women who use violent acts, and the reasons why they use such acts. Girls' and young women's violent acts, as externalized actions directed outward toward other people and not against their own bodies, turned out to be something that the professionals had seldom discussed at their workplaces. However, in the focus group conversations, one way to talk about girls' and young women's violent acts was to make sense of them in relation to their *(dys)functionality*. Violent acts are thus made meaningful and understandable by whether or not they fulfill a function in handling social or psychological aspects of girls' or young women's lives. Accordingly, *(dys)functionality* can be understood as a concept when analyzing the professionals' talk and the ways in which they made girls' and young women's violent acts understandable. Below, I will show how the meaning and understanding of violence are constructed in relation to *(dys)functionality* within the focus group conversations. In the narratives, three repertoires emerge as crucial for the understanding and construction of girls' and young women's violent acts. These repertoires are (1) *violence as social functionality*, (2) *violence as psychological functionality*, and (3) *violence as dysfunctionality*.

### *Violence as Social Functionality—A Tool and a Way for Girls to Resolve Social Situations*

The repertoire of violence as social functionality highlights violence as a way to resolve conflicts, test (gendered) boundaries, achieve gender equality or justice, and stand up for oneself. The use of this repertoire is illustrated in the following extract:

Extract 1—Focus Group 1 (Anton, Fia, Hans, Linda)

Fia: I like to think anyway that, that they have a strength, these girls who break so completely with the norm and actually use their bodies as tools rather than objects. Thus, I don't know, I can't say that there is something positive in using violence, but this particular norm breaking I can, kind of, they don't put themselves in the role of a victim, they take control.

Fia argues that violence is not necessarily negative, but that in some contexts, it fulfills a function, even though it seems to be hard for her to admit that violence might include positive aspects. In this case, it is about not becoming a victim but taking control and acting, using one's body as a tool. Fia

also stresses the idea that girls' and young women's violent acts, and actions in which girls and young women use their bodies and violence as a tool within a specific social situation, can be gender transgressive. Violence is thus constructed as a useful and helpful tool to deal with social situations and restrictive gender norms. The repertoire of violence as social functionality is highlighted in a slightly different way in the following extract:

Extract 2—Focus Group 1 (Anton, Fia, Hans, Linda)

Fia: I think of adolescents and children who are using violence as a means of communication, uh, that there is a lack of the ability to use words or that they don't feel they're heard when they talk; however, everyone "hears" you when you fight or everyone sees you when you fight.

Hans: Yeah, I think of a girl that, she was like this crazy talkative girl as well. (Fia: Yeah.) She was also verbally aggressive. (Fia: Yes.) Thus, that she, she saw as her big win, what she experienced was that all of a sudden she got respect, all of a sudden guys looked up to her and asked her for help if there was anyone they would fight or anyone would, thus they approached her for help.

Fia describes how violence can be used as a means of communication, as a way to compensate for a lack of communication skills, or when someone does not feel that people are listening to what she is saying. Hans, however, takes the discussion further and suggests other explanations for why girls or young women are using violence. Factors such as being a way to get respect and to get attention from guys, but also to become someone whom people ask for help, are mentioned as reasons why violent acts are or can be used by girls and young women. Girls' and young women's violent acts are thus made understandable as a way to get attention and be listened to, but also in relation to an idea of helpfulness (or caring) as well as part of a heteronormative affirmation. Accordingly, there are a number of ways in which violent acts can be used as a social tool and various ways in which violence is produced as meaningful in relation to different contextual and gendered situations. Girls' and young women's violent acts are given a social function, which makes it possible to understand them as something that should not necessarily be perceived as socially illegitimate. Rather, girls' and young women's use of violent acts is made meaningful by negotiating norms of femininity, by highlighting helpful (or caring) and active subjects, and by articulating expressions of emancipation and empowerment in relation to the discourse of girl power. Thus, in this repertoire, violence can be understood as an untroubled, understandable, or useful action in terms of its social function in a specific context. These constructions of girls' and young women's violence can be understood as related to explanations which argue that feminism and women's liberation influence women's opportunities to enter society and the arena of violence and crime, the liberation theory of crime and violence. However, as Luke (2008) emphasizes, it is important to question and discuss these ideas further since the use of violent acts does not necessarily give girls and young women power or privilege in their lives, or in society, but rather girls' and young women's violence is constructed as an increasing social problem.

### *Violence as Psychological Functionality—Reactions to Girls' Victimization and Problems*

In the focus group interviews, the professionals also talk about and refer to girls' and young women's victimization. This can be understood as rooted in structural problems, but usually in the professionals' talk, it was constructed in relation to individual psychological problems; for example, in talk about abuse, a difficult childhood or a problematic home environment. This can be linked to



the repertoire of violence as (individual) psychological functionality. The use of this repertoire is illustrated in the following extract::

Extract 3—Focus Group 3 (Helena, Ingrid, Malin, Linda)

Malin: Purely physical violence. (Ingrid: Yeah, yes.) Fighting. (Ingrid: Yeah.) Yes, but you throw an insult and then start fighting. (Linda: Yeah.) Uh, and, I don't know where I would go but, but it's also extremely victimized girls. (Helena: Yeah, that's right.) These girls have got so far into (drug) abuse and. (Ingrid: Yeah.) Prostitution. (Ingrid: Yeah.) It's broken family relationships, uh, often unspecified diagnoses.

In this excerpt, girls' and young women's violent acts are constructed around extreme victimization in which factors such as abuse, prostitution, problematic family relations, and (unspecified) psychomedical diagnoses are given great importance. Thus, girls' and young women's violent acts are understood and given meaning in relation to their victimization and problematic living situations. Hans talks about his experiences of working with girls and young women who use violent acts are illustrated in the following extract:

Extract 4—Focus Group 1 (Anton, Fia, Hans, Linda)

Hans: If I look at the ones I've met, you can clearly imagine that they're not just a bit angry or a little more than angry, but the ones who physically fight other people then it's the ones who have lived in a context or in families where there has been abuse or crime or domestic violence, and where there are a lot of frustrations within themselves, because they feel victimized, because they are victimized in many cases. It has a lot to do with that, when you get the chance for a conversation it's often this about repaying, even if I don't hit the one who beat me it's this, to not be the one who gets [beaten - my interpretation], to avoid being scared, I think.

Hans describes girls' and young women's violent acts in relation to family situations, which include criminality, abuse, and violence. The violent acts are constructed around the individual psychological function of managing their own victimization, but ultimately also as a way to manage their frustration and fear and to fight back, even if the violent acts are not directed against the person who hurt them. By invoking this repertoire, Hans is able to make violent acts understandable, socially legitimate, and untroubled as a consequence of victimization and individual (gendered) problems. The use of this repertoire is further illustrated in the following extract:

Extract 5—Focus Group 2 (Alicia, Björn, Ida, Joanna, Mira, Linda)

Ida: I feel that one problematizes women's violence to a much greater extent, through my job I can feel that there is an interest in women's violence, women who exert violence, there is also a greater tendency to seek the causes of violence. (Several: Yeah.) Or diagnose violence. (Several: Yeah.) What is this about, is it mental disease, mental illness? We know that many of the women who serve time for murder do it for murder in a close relationship. (Several: Yeah.) Then it can involve parents or partners or other relatives. (Linda: Yeah.) Arson is a typical psychiatric diagnosis almost, thus it comes with an element of mental illness, uh, and if there's anyone who's acting out

extensively, it, one almost always draws connections with the family situation, if they're young, it's about how their childhood has been, has she been a victim of violence before?

The use of violence is once again described as being closely linked to childhood circumstances and one's own victimization, but the narrative also highlights that women's (and likely girls' and young women's) violence is constructed around ideas of gender, age, and psychological factors. Thus, in constructing girls' and young women's violent acts, there is a perceived need to find the cause of violence to a greater extent than if the perpetrator were male. This leaves little room for alternative meanings for anger and violent acts, allowing for constructions other than as a separate individual issue. The various kinds of victimization and problems highlighted in the focus group sessions can be briefly described as a consequence of being a young female victim of gendered violence (physical, psychological, or sexual by, e.g., family members, partners, schoolmates, or street violence), as a consequence of one's family situation (parents' alcohol or drug use, a sick parent, divorce or death within the family), or as a consequence of one's own situation (alcohol or drug use or psychiatric diagnoses such as post-traumatic stress disorder or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder).

When the repertoire of psychological functionality is invoked, the violent acts and the girls/young women as female subjects are talked about and made understandable in relation to girls' and young women's victimization and problems. This is in line with normative conceptions of gender, age, and emotional expressions and reactions and can be understood in relation to gendered ideas about passivity, vulnerability, and the discourse of girlhood in crisis. This way of producing meaning, by relating violent acts to factors in which one's own victimization or problems are brought into focus, presents girls and young women as vulnerable and as passive victims rather than active agents in their own lives. It also, as Brown (2010, 2012) and Miller and White (2004) emphasize, runs the risk of neglecting structural factors and failing to develop a broader understanding of girls' and young women's violence or of their life situations.

### *Violence as Dysfunctionality—When Violence Does Not Match Professionals' Expectations*

Girls' and young women's violence, as previously shown, is constructed and made meaningful by talking about the function of violent acts for the girls and young women who use it, but what happens when violent acts transgress socially legitimate understandings of gendered ways of using violence? The use of the repertoire of violence as dysfunctionality is illustrated in the following extract:

#### Extract 6—Focus Group 1 (Anton, Fia, Hans, Linda)

- Hans: Yes. I think, it's just one girl I think deviated from that, who hasn't been victimized at home or anything; thus, when it was only a power trip. (Fia: Yeah.) It feels, almost like an addiction, sort of, that you can talk about those feelings like an intoxication, a pleasurable experience of getting people to be scared, the kick in that, she could talk very eloquently about that.
- Anton: Yes, but I think it controls a lot then. People who abuse, you're injecting or whatever you use, you get something out of it, it's the same thing if you go out and get to hit someone, it's a feeling.

Above, the repertoire of violence as (individual) psychological functionality is used in contrast to a repertoire of violence as dysfunctionality, within which violent acts are constructed as an addiction, an intoxication, and a pleasurable experience and feeling but also as a power trip or as a way to

frighten people. This repertoire is not as prominent in the narratives as the other two. However, it is important insofar as it allows the professionals to talk about actions that cannot be constructed as functional, untroubled, or socially legitimate gendered acts. When this repertoire is invoked, violent acts are represented as being “for kicks” (Extract 7—Focus Group 1, Anton, Fia, Hans, Linda), and they transgress understandable or untroubled gendered understandings of violence, both in the way in which and by whom it may be used as well as the reasons for its use. However, even though the function of violence as being “for kicks” is described in relation to both social and psychological factors, these kinds of violent acts are perceived as rather troubled and constructed as dysfunctional. An alternative way of framing certain violent acts in this way is by representing them as not following the expected gendered patterns of action. This is illustrated in the following extract:

Extract 8—Focus Group 1 (Anton, Fia, Hans, Linda)

- Anton: This girl started and said “that one said this, and that one has done that” and then she made the gang start and they inflicted severe beatings, but afterwards they used alcohol and benzo and a lot of other things, so they were really crazy.
- Fia: It’s clear, then, it’s triggered.
- Hans: But they did the opposite, because sometimes one thinks alcohol, benzo and things like that and then there will be a fight, but they did the opposite, they decided to fight first and then took them [alcohol and drugs].
- Fia: So they incite and instigate the fight.
- Hans: Yes. Planned the fight first and then took the stuff to handle it.

This narrative highlights a group of young people who used violent acts and in which one person was described as a girl who triggered the others in the group and hence is blamed for starting the fights. The violence is described as serious or rough, which is important for how these violent acts are constructed as troubled, but two other aspects also seem to be of importance. The first is the girl’s active role in the group and the way in which this is described as triggering when the girl said different things to get the group started. This active position is constructed as deviant behavior for a girl, since the violence is too much, not empowering or defensive but possibly an attack (see also Arif, 2015). The second aspect concerns the timing of the violent acts, that is, that they were enacted first and only afterward did the group use alcohol and drugs to handle the situation. If these violent acts had instead been carried out under the influence of alcohol and drugs, it would have made it easier to explain both them and the girl’s participation in terms of the repertoire of violence as psychological functionality. Now, it becomes difficult to make the gendered aspects intelligible.

## Conclusions

In these narratives, violent acts appear to be more or less easy for the professionals to talk about and relate to depending on factors such as contextual and structural aspects and the girls’ and young women’s life situations and degrees of victimization. Accordingly, not all forms of violence are perceived as troubled or illegitimate, but instead the different repertoires of (dys)functionality become important for how the professionals understand and conceptualize violent acts. The acts described in the repertoire of violence as a social function, for example, may be perceived as understandable and can be made meaningful as a defense or conflict resolution in a school situation. However, the same kind of violent act, for example, hitting another person, is constructed as problematic and troubled if it occurs in another context or if it is understood as transgressing reasons for using violent acts that are intelligible in gendered terms.

Furthermore, the narratives show that the professionals argue, more or less easily, that girls' and young women's violent acts fulfill a function and that it can be beneficial for the girl or young woman to use violent acts. This, however, raises the question of whether there is a risk that girls' and young women's violence will be understood as something positive, emancipating, and empowering and that structural aspects and inequalities, which are still part of girls' and young women's lives, will go unnoticed or be rendered invisible. It is therefore important, as researchers have pointed out (e.g., Brown et al., 2007; Luke, 2008; Schaffner, 2007), to highlight girls' and young women's life situations and contexts, in relation to experiences of abuse, maltreatment, inequalities and marginalization, but also to question the idea that girls' and young women's emancipation will increase their use of violence and give them access to society and power (cf. Luke, 2008).

Since most social work practice today is structured around individual problems (Estrada, 2001), there is also a risk that structural issues will be ignored when working with or approaching the issue of girls' and young women's use of violence. When the psychological repertoire and victimization are used as the explanation for girls' and young women's use of violence, there is also a risk of psychologizing or pathologizing violence. Ultimately, this is likely to put the responsibility onto the girl or young woman to resolve the issues surrounding violence and her life situation regardless of the structural aspects or context.

However, when girls and young women use violent acts due to boredom, in order to provoke, for kicks or as a power trip, it becomes difficult for professionals to make the violence intelligible. This may have the effect that girls' and young women's violent acts will be deemed too hard to work with when they are understood as dysfunctional and too gender transgressive, "strange," or troubled. If, on the other hand, girls' and young women's violence is understood by social work professionals as positive or as having a function, there is a risk that the responsibility for hurting another person will be diminished.

How girls' and young women's violence is understood, thus affects the opportunities and constraints for professionals in the area of social work practice and prevention work on violence, but it also affects girls' and young women's lives. As researchers such as Berg et al. (2013), Burman and Batchelor (2009), and Miller (2002) have emphasized, gender, context, and the girl's or young woman's life situation need to be included and questioned in trying to deconstruct (gendered) ideas about violence. Moreover, it is also important to reflect upon how girls' and young women's violent acts are constructed and understood in relation to cultural norms, social structures, and historical understandings of violence and the troublesome girl and young woman. How, then, can social work practice be enhanced when working with girls' and young women's use of violence?

## **Implications for Social Work Practice**

In order to improve social work practice, there is a need for a multifaceted understanding of girls' and young women's violent acts that questions gendered preconceptions about violence and highlights girls' and young women's various contextual situations and lives. I also want to emphasize the importance of including an intersectional theoretical approach in relation to the wider cultural, historical, and social context, including questioning the possibilities and constraints around how young people, here specifically girls and young women, are expected to feel and (re)act.

## **Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## **Funding**

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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